DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 433 CG 028 021

AUTHOR O'Connell, Melissa; Fondo, Michelle
TITLE Students 4 Students. Robinswood Middle School (Orlando, Florida).
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National School-Age Care Alliance (Orlando, FL, April 17-19, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Counseling Techniques; *Helping Relationship; *High Risk Students; High School Students; *Middle Schools; *Peer Counseling; Program Descriptions; Pupil Personnel Services; Secondary Education; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Middle School Students; *Student Assistance Programs

ABSTRACT

Recognizing that middle school students frequently have difficulty sharing their problems with adults, a program was initiated at Robinswood Middle School (Orlando, Florida) to bridge the gap between child and adult by asking older students, such as high school students, to serve as listeners for at-risk middle school students. The development of this program is described. The paper begins with a first-person narrative describing the experiences of the student facilitator. This high school student's duties included facilitating talk groups-ranging from divorce groups to leadership groups-and working in concert both with peer mediation and with teachers. Support groups would meet once a week for 6 to 8 weeks and the student coordinator organized activities and guest speakers. Many students, it is reported, made noticeable improvements in academics and in attitude. The student facilitator worked in conjunction with the Student Assistance and Family Empowerment (SAFE) coordinator at the middle school. The SAFE Program provides support groups, mentor programs, and referral to outside agencies for at-risk students. Because students' accepted and trusted the student facilitator, she became the "bridge" between students and teachers on the SAFE team. Some of the students' comments are included here, as are step-by-step instructions for starting such a program. (RJM)

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Students 4 Students

Melissa O'Connell

SAFE Coordinator

Michelle Fondo

Student Facilitator

Robinswood Middle School
Orlando, Florida
407-296-5140

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M. O'Connell

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Overview

In the school system today there are various programs for special students at risk: New Horizons for those students with drug problems, the SAFE Program for those students with other drug problems, family problems, and problems that may make a student high risk for many behaviors, COMPACT for those students who may need extra help from an adult mentor, and the list goes on. If a student is verbal to an adult on school campus, a program can be found for the problem he or she possesses.

What if a child is afraid to speak with an adult? This happens sometimes in the middle school aged child. At this time in a child's life, when making the transition from child to teenager, to verbalize what is bothering them, much less telling an adult is an overwhelming task. Often the child does not come forth until the problem has escalated to the degree that an adult notices the changed behavior or the child's peers tell an adult.

At Robinswood Middle School a unique program was piloted. This program designed by Michelle Fondo, a senior at Winter Park High School, and Melissa O'Connell, the SAFE Coordinator at Robinswood Middle School, focusses on those children who are more comfortable speaking with someone older, but closer to their own age. This program, "Students 4 Students" bridges the gap between those children and the adults on campus who can help. Michelle works with targeted students on a regular basis in a small group setting. This program is confidential, safe, and relaxed. The response has been overwhelming. Michelle has been accepted by the faculty and students alike.

Many SAFE Coordinators want to implement such a partnership between high school and middle school students, and several high school students are eager to get involved. The old saying "It takes a village to raise a child" certainly comes into play. The philosophy of becoming involved as a community and working together to help each other and learn from each other is very important.

Student Facilitator

As the first student facilitator of "Students 4 Students", every day was an adventure; a new chance to learn. The experiences that I had are, and will always remain, invaluable to me. Having the opportunity to work in my career interest area gave me the chance to narrow my path to my intended career. In my internship, I facilitated various talk groups ranging from divorce groups to leadership groups. I also worked closely with several exceptional education students; Educable Mentally Handicap (EMH), Specific Learning Disabilities(SLD), Language Learning Disabilities(LLD), and Advanced level Reading and Math. Tutorials and shadowing teachers were an excellent chance to observe both the teachers and students. I also worked closely with the Peer Mediators and Peer Counselors.

There was no "typical" day for me. Each day was different. I learned a great deal from each and every student and formed many friendships as well. I learned just as much from them as they learned from me. The students with which I worked were all unique in their own way. They were generally appreciative of the time we spent together and looked forward to our subsequent meetings. The bonds we formed will remain strong for years to come.

I was responsible for designing my own "lesson plans" for the groups and tutorials. We did a variety of projects. Self-esteem builders, creative projects, and writing assignments are a few of the many things we did. The response I got from the students was inspiring to me. The role I played there was not a "teacher" figure, but rather a friend and fellow adolescent. The fact that I did not stress academic issues during groups gave the students a chance to take a breather during the week and have some fun. During tutorials, I came up with creative ways to help exceptional education students with reading, writing, and math.

One of my most challenging quests was working with seventh and eighth grade Educable Mentally Handicap (EMH) students. There were five of them who could not read at all. Their ages were between eleven and sixteen years old, but they were in middle school. At first, I was shocked and unsure of how to go about handling this type of student. I did a lot of research and talked to many teachers, including my previous elementary school teachers. Finally, I came up with a conclusion. I approached them with a variety of activities that they would enjoy doing. I wrote my own story about Michael Jordan in the simplest English I knew. I made photocopies of pictures of him and made a little book for each of them. I encouraged the students to try their hardest and that I would bring candy if they stayed focussed and tried their best. They did an amazing job. At the end of the term, they had all learned ten "Michael Jordan Vocabulary Words". One of them could read the whole two pages! It was one of the strongest feelings of accomplishment I have ever felt. It was a very emotional time for the student who had never read before too. He was very content with himself, yet proud and extremely excited about his accomplishment. For me, there is no feeling more satisfying than reaching a child in need of extra help.

One of my most eye opening experiences in a group was when I asked a group of eighth grade girls what they liked to do, and they looked at each other, giggled, and the leader of the group responded, "Oh, have sex, do drugs, you know". I was absolutely shocked not only at the words she said, but the fact that she said them. I was unsure how to handle the situation and had to sleep on it for a week, but by then things had calmed. The group went well. They opened my eyes to a whole new world of adolescence.

I kept a log each day and recorded feelings and ideas for the next meetings with each group. I also noted exciting and not so exciting observations of the students. Melissa O'Connell, the SAFE Coordinator served not only as my advisor, but quickly became my best friend and mentor as well. She helped me sort through feelings on a daily basis. Things were tough for me at times because I wanted to help each student and it wasn't that easy. There were times

when students in my groups were suspended or had other behavioral problems. Because of confidentiality standards, I had to tell my advisor about certain situations in their lives. Although I explained this to them at the beginning of our meetings, there were hurt feelings a few times. That was the most difficult thing for me.

As a whole, things could not have gone better. The program took off strongly and finished even stronger. As people heard about our program, it became desired at many schools. We plan to work on expanding the program throughout the county for the upcoming school year, but we have even higher goals for the future. "Students 4 Students" has proven to be successful and has great potential to be implemented nationally, and eventually, internationally.

SAFE Coordinator

As the SAFE Coordinator (Student Assistance and Family Empowerment) at Robinswood Middle School in Orlando, Florida, I was always searching for innovative help for my at-risk students. During the summer of 1996, a high school senior from a local high school came to me with an idea. She had extra time in her schedule and wanted to volunteer at a middle school, working with the types of children that were already in my program. The SAFE Program, through a team effort, provides support groups, mentor programs and referral to outside agencies for the more at risk students at our school. One problem I had been having was reaching those children who were unsure and suspicious of talking to an adult about any problem they were having, much less the more serious problems that some adolescents have. I thought if there was someone closer to the middle schoolers' age, that was safe to talk with, would fill this gap in my program. After much brainstorming, "Students 4 Students" was born.

It was decided that Michelle Fondo, the student facilitator would conduct "talk groups" composed of students who may be having problems in classes, with the parents, with their parents' divorce, or just having trouble growing up. She met with each group once a week for six to eight weeks. She was responsible for activities and guest speakers she brought into the group. Many of these students displayed a noticeable improvement while her group, ranging from improved academic progress to an improved attitude supported in fewer discipline referrals.

She also ran tutorials with the exceptional education students. Michelle worked one on one with educable mentally handicapped students as well as working with specific learning disabled and language learning disabled students. The teachers looked forward to her energetic assistance and the students looked forward to her individualized help.

Michelle was quickly accepted by the students due to her accessibility to them as well as her closeness in age. She became the "bridge" between some students and the teachers on the SAFE Team. Many students who had been

"afraid" to speak to an adult for fear of confidentiality were encouraged by Michelle to speak to one. Michelle's rapport with the middle school-aged students filled in that gap which had stopped many from the help they needed.

The SAFE Program at Robinswood will continue Students 4 Students and encourage and help other SAFE Programs to a start a Students 4 Students of their own.

Comments from the students...

"Students 4 Students" has benefited many people at my school; from support groups to learning about high school life. I think it is a great program that should be continued in many schools".

-Amy Nealy

"Students 4 Students is a very good program. We talked a lot about the real world. It was a great opportunity for me to pe in this program. It gave me a chance to be all that I can be."

-Julie Ann Burce

"It has helped me to prepare for my future"

-Akini Blood-Lewis

"It has helped me to become a better leader, to have better speaking skills, and to develop new ways to deal with situations."

-Brandon Bradwell

"It has helped me prepare for my future and to be more confident"

-Maria Cruz

"Students 4 Students has helped me in many ways. I learned the most when a teenage mom came in and talked with us about life as a student-mother and all the hardships and responsibilities attached."

-Nicole Copemann

"I got involved with Students 4 Students by being a peer mediator. It has helped me by letting me know what to expect when I get into high school."

-Scott Brown

"Students 4 Students has helped me to be a better leader. I think it should be carried on throughout middle school and high school."

-Andra Haynes

"It has helped me to learn how to prevent violence and encourage harmony."

-Thanh Luong

"It helped me to learn what high school is all about, including the peer pressures involved in growing up."

-Natasha St. Pierre

"It helped me a lot. I learned how to read better."

Daniel George

"Students 4 Students has helped me to become a better leader and also to think twice before I act."

-Kaley Cain

"It gives you a chance to talk to someone around your own age about stuff you can't talk about with adults."

-Sarah Fehring

"It's educational about things you need to know for high school. You get to talk to people other than your parents who will understand you."

-Jennifer Cronin

"It is very influential and helps me with problems that I have in school. It has given me people to look up to that care about me."

-Karolyn Oakley

"It's really cool. You can talk to someone around your own age about things you wouldn't talk to your parents about."

-Issa Mercedes

"It has changed my life in a lot of ways. I especially enjoyed doing creative activities. I learned not to be mad at my parents because they're divorced."

-Megan Serrano

"I learned that even though friends make mistakes, they do change. I also learned that even though my parents are divorced, they still love me. I learned a lot of things that will help me in life."

-Michelle Briscoe

"Students 4 Students has helped me to be a better friend and also taught me what a real friend is. It has helped me bring up my grades and be more confident with myself."

-Allison Rogers

"It has given me a chance to ask a lot of useful questions about high school."

-Larry Morales

"It is a very good opportunity for everyone to get involved in because you can talk about anything you want and it helps you get through rough times."

-Itena Cole

Students 4 Students

How to start -

1. **Assess what your needs are for your particular organization.** Maybe you have children who need more attention than the adults have to give. You may have children who need mentoring by a good role model closer to their own age. Sometimes in a group of children you have a large number from newly divorced families. Do not be afraid to ask children what they want or need.

2. **Know what you want the volunteer to do.** Have a concrete idea of exactly what you want the volunteer to do. You will save time and energy if you have this well thought out before you choose your high school senior.

3. **Interview those older students who are interested in helping.** Make sure that what they want to do matches what you want them to do. The worst thing for children is to have a volunteer start and then quit before their time is finished. The worst thing for a volunteer is to find out that they do not like what they got into. This adds to the already low self-esteem of these types of children and the anxiety of the already stressed high school senior.

4. **Know exactly what the volunteer plans to do.** Require lesson plans. Have them turned into you before the week they are to be executed. This saves your time in copying materials or searching for materials needed. It also helps the volunteer to stay more focussed and organized.

5. **Choose the children to take part in the program carefully.** Although all children can use an extra set of ears to listen to them, not all children are appropriate for this program. Do not give the volunteer any discipline problems. If a trained adult cannot keep them under control, do not expect a high school senior to be able to do so. Most children are extremely receptive to the student volunteer and enjoy their time with them. Do not allow the children to spend more than the allotted time with the volunteer. To do this starts a trend and we do not want to overwork our volunteer! Be sure you send permission slips to all parents of children involved and explain the program to them.

6. **Support your volunteer.** Working with children is difficult at best. Working with children who have some problems can be very taxing. Remember, the volunteer is also going to school. Check and see if they need an extra set of ears! Sometimes just letting them talk helps to remove the stresses associated with being a senior in high school. Talk about what is going on in their groups. Allow some debriefing time at the week's end. Offer some tricks of the trade and tips you have learned. Let them learn from the mistakes you have made. Encourage them always. They may get caught up in the drama of the childrens' lives at first, but time and experience takes care of that!

Commonly asked questions....

What is Students 4 Students? Students 4 Students is a unique program at Robinswood Middle School which falls under the SAFE Program. A high school senior, as part of the executive internship program, comes to Robinswood for twelve hours a week. Within that time, they conduct group talks on subjects such as divorce, getting ready for high school, living in a step-family, growing up and other pertinent subjects to the middle school age level. They also conduct tutoring groups for students whose reading/math skills are below grade level.

Who supervises this program? The program is supervised on the school site by the SAFE Coordinator and the student advisor is supervised by the executive internship director.

What does the intern get from this program? The student intern can receive credit toward graduation through a dual enrollment with Valencia Community College. They are considered a volunteer and acquire volunteer hours for scholarship purposes. More importantly the intern gains knowledge from the tasks they are doing as well as the feeling of confidence gained from service education.

How are students chosen to participate in Students 4 Students? Students are referred to the SAFE Coordinator for various reasons. Some students just need or want some extra attention, some are too afraid to speak with adults initially about a problem, some are worried about going on to high school and some just want to talk with someone who has their perspective. After the initial referral from an adult on campus, another student or themselves, the student is screened by the SAFE Coordinator. They are then placed in an appropriate setting for their need. Students 4 Students meets the need for many of these students.

When and where do these groups meet? For tutoring, the students meet in a room nearby their classroom. For other types of groups, the SAFE Room is used for confidentiality purposes. These groups and tutorials meet for an hour once a week for approximately six weeks.

Why was this program developed? After much thought and discussion during the summer before school started, Michelle Fondo, a Winter Park High School senior and Melissa O'Connell, a SAFE Coordinator at Robinswood Middle School decided that many children do not get the attention they want or need because of the lack of time many adults on a school campus have. They realized that many children just need someone to listen to them and why couldn't a high school senior act as a listener and guide for these children? Michelle volunteered the first semester and the program served the needs of approximately 65 students. During the second semester Students 4 Students has become a well known source of help on the campus of Robinswood serving an additional 85 students!

What to look for in a volunteer

LIKEABLE

Students 4 Students

Good Grades

A self-starter

Likes children

Confident

Personable

LOW ABSENTEE RATE